

Terrorist Attack

Disaster Response for the Oklahoma City Bombing

A truck bomb exploded outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, at 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995. The explosion killed 168 people and injured many others. In addition to the immediate horrific impact, the rescue and recovery efforts inflicted additional deaths and untold injuries and emotional scars.

The intentional and unpredictable nature of this terrorist attack immediately and permanently changed the way Oklahomans and others across the nation view their personal security. This public perception has been expressed by changes to the built environment and has accelerated an introverted design philosophy as well as new security requirements for public spaces and new public structures, nationwide. This paper examines how Oklahoma City (City), the state historic preservation office (SHPO), and other government agencies responded to the threat of additional loss of historic fabric during the recovery process and during the creation of the Oklahoma City National Memorial. A discussion is included concerning how public programs were structured to encourage appropriate preservation practice.

The bombing caused damage to over 300 buildings. Seventy-three of these were buildings with recognized historical significance. Window damage was the most obvious and widespread damage with glass breakage reported over one mile from the blast. Many buildings were also structurally damaged within six blocks of the epicenter. Consequently, 14 buildings have been demolished including the targeted federal building, which was imploded on national television shortly after the devastating event. Plans for further

demolition of adjacent structures continue to be announced, even after the fifth anniversary. Public opinion was leading the charge to remove all damaged fabric and replace it with symbols of artistic expression, economic strength, and the resilient character of the Midwest. The National Endowment for the Arts sponsored an open discussion and design charette, July 24-25, 1995, which produced a master plan for the damaged area of Oklahoma City's Central Business District. During preliminary discussions, citizens offered various descriptions of proposed cityscapes that would have required the razing of a majority of the surrounding historic buildings which were unattractive for retention because of neglect due to the economic conditions before the explosion. However, the design professionals produced a final report that focused on larger areas for zoning and encouraged re-use of the existing buildings.

The SHPO was located in the Journal Record Building, a historic building immediately north of the Murrah Building. This building would eventually become part of the Oklahoma City National Memorial site, housing the museum and archives, as well as the Memorial

The city center of Oklahoma City after the bombing. The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building is located in the left foreground.



Institute for Prevention of Terrorism. The Journal Record Building was within the boundaries of a 12-block area that was declared a crime scene and seized by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Similar to other state and private offices neighboring the federal building, the SHPO was relocated without access to National Register of Historic Places files and office equipment. Some members of the staff were hospitalized due to injuries sustained during the bombing. Despite these hurdles, SHPO served as host for preservation partners who came from across the United States. They rallied together with the common goal of working with the City to assist the property owners within the bomb-affected area by assessing the damage to each historic building and offering direction for the steps they could take to repair and preserve their properties.

Consultation occurred with the National Park Service (NPS), the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the American Institute of Architects to assemble teams consisting of preservation experts, architects, and structural engineers. The teams worked on a volunteer basis to produce written reports for individual properties based on site visits during the week of May 15-19, 1995. The Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation* was the subject of consultation with property owners, which was required by Section 106 review and encouraged by the 20% tax credits for certified historic structures. Without these programs, implemented as key tools for assisting appropriate preservation, the City would have lost many of the remaining irreplaceable historic resources to redevelopment. Coincidentally, Oklahoma's Seventh Annual Statewide Preservation Conference had been scheduled 18 months in advance for the first week of May in Oklahoma City at a building a few blocks south of the Murrah Building. This forum was used as a gathering place for preservation partners who came to assist in planning efforts, to inform the public about the extent of the damage, and to introduce information and sources for information concerning appropriate preservation practice. Most importantly, preservationists were placed in the spotlight to explain the significance of the affected historic buildings and why they should remain as participants in an ever-changing built environment, part of the daily life of the community, as instructed by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended.

Political promises concerning justice and healing came from top government officials who were onsite accompanied by national media. The terrorist attack was labeled a "historic event" the same day it occurred by those spokespersons. The bombing was described as the most destructive single act of violence on American soil. Ironically, the bombing was a calculated expression of protest against similar acts of violence, which it, itself, exemplifies.

Testimony of extraordinary heroism, compassion, and sacrifice associated with the rescue efforts immediately after the bombing have been covered by the media as the community attempted to come to grips with man's inhumanity to man and to renew confidence in the ideals of community. These interpretations silenced accurate communication of the crippling memories shared by rescue workers and survivors.

Much of the physical evidence of the site has been swept away in preparation for reconstruction to facilitate emotional rebirth of the City. For example, retention of the crater left in the street and preservation of the scarred buildings in the immediate area could have allowed the public the opportunity to re-interpret the event on site in relation to future occurrences and philosophies.

Efforts for museum purposes and plans to memorialize the event with a symbolic tribute began to clash with preservation efforts concerning retention of historic structures for their significance unrelated to the bombing event. Additionally, museum development and plans for constructing a memorial were competing conceptually with the idea of preserving physical evidence of the bombing by retaining damaged elements of buildings in place for future consideration. The Oklahoma City National Memorial, including the museum collections and the Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, received \$29.8 million in public funding and private donations.

These conflicting forces, each designed for educating the public concerning this event, collide on one site and are exemplified by the schizophrenic rehabilitation plans for the Journal Record Building. The north and east (front) facades will be rehabilitated with reference to the original building, the India Shrine Temple, designed by Solomon Andrew Layton who was a prominent architect in Oklahoma during a period of time shortly after statehood. The west

facade (back) was a common demising wall historically, and was relatively recently exposed by the demolition of the adjacent building. This non-historic facade will be embellished with new construction, as the new entry to the museum. The south facade faced the Murrah Building at the time of the bombing (now the Memorial site) and will be sealed to preserve evidence of the effect of the bombing on that structure. The interior was demolished by necessity, down to the structural concrete frame, and the marble that historically lined the lobbies and public corridors was stored for reinstallation. When cost estimates exceeded expectations, the SHPO (which was empowered by the Section 106 process) was able to negotiate reconsideration of the proposal to sell the historic marble that could potentially secure additional funding for the associated new construction. All the players in the memorial process, representing each respective discipline of history, argued passionately for the importance of acknowledging the past, which the public monetarily supported without recognition of any conflict in methodology. Of all the rehabilitation projects funded by the Murrah District Revitalization Program (which will be described below), the Journal Record Building has proven the most costly to repair because of its size and its close proximity to the bomb epicenter (half block separation). The City has facilitated \$12,550,000 in federal grant funds to support adaptive re-use of this historic property. Just over \$2 million of this was used to acquire the building and site. This step proved necessary when the former owners indicated no interest in retaining the building. It had been fully occupied at the time of the bombing.

The historic Young Mens' Christian Association (YMCA) building (c. 1950) housed a child-care facility and was a prominent building severely damaged by the bombing. The preservation community, represented by publicly respected historians, began a campaign early in the recovery efforts to focus attention on the fact that it remains the only example of International style architecture extant in the Oklahoma City Central Business District. Additionally, its physical proximity to the terrorist-targeted building serves to define the context of that event, which is symbolized in the Memorial on the site of the demolished Murrah Building. Preservationists continue to object to current plans by the private sector to demolish the YMCA and construct a

multi-floor parking structure to serve adjacent businesses, visitors of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and the new federal campus that will replace the Murrah Building. The private sector argues that Oklahoma City must retain an environment conducive to the commercial functions with a major focus on parking.

In addition to the allocation of funding for the Memorial, a separate pool of funds was established to assist the City in its recovery efforts. Congress appropriated \$52.5 million to fund repairs to adjacent damaged buildings and to promote economic recovery of the affected Central Business District. The City established the Murrah District Revitalization Program to disburse the federal funds and to respond to requests for assistance in accordance with the appropriating legislation. To accommodate the unprecedented purposes of the program and the emergency nature of the requests, the federal regulations governing the procedures for each of the three federal funding sources were revised to specifically address the goals of the new program. For example, the requirements concerning low-to moderate-income families relevant to the Department of Housing and Urban Development were not relevant to the purposes of the revitalization program, and therefore they were not adopted or implemented. However, the City was responsible for compliance with federal wage laws (Davis-Bacon) and environmental laws, including those addressing historic preservation.

SHPO had enjoyed a productive relationship with the Planning Department, defined by the Certified Local Government (CLG) Program for more than 20 years, despite aggressive activities and the notorious success of the Urban Renewal Program perpetuated by a City Council focused solely on redevelopment. The downtown area had been surveyed and several buildings individually eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), and one potential historic district had been identified. The City had assisted the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the General Services Administration in identifying and securing damaged buildings during the period of occupation by the FBI. The resulting reports and City records concerning identified historic resources were critical to the success of the assessment program facilitated by SHPO. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, SHPO, and the City negotiated a programmatic agreement which

The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building after the bombing on April 19, 1995.

authorized the City Planning Department to address specific types of repairs in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation* to facilitate and expedite the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 process. This partnership in the review process has continued for the past five years and has proven to be essential in the expediency required when safety issues associated with the damaged buildings were questionable.

Funds were disbursed in the form of grants to property owners in an effort to ensure that all buildings were returned to a condition equivalent to that present at the time of the bombing. Those buildings that had been boarded-up would be excluded from the program unless proposals were submitted to insure re-use. Because most buildings had been constructed prior to current building and life/safety code requirements, most damage repairs included some cost component targeted toward bringing the structure up to current code. In some cases, the costs related to code upgrades were more than the actual cost of direct bomb damage repairs. Building code officials worked closely with building owners to find creative solutions to life/safety issues when there was a sense of emergency associated with repairs. These discussions focused attention on potential stipulations that the City could address when re-adopting a national building code model. Preservation partners from various cities throughout the United States offered examples of modified language and recommendations based on their experience. Various groups associated with disaster preparedness were established and formed on-call teams to serve in future disasters. These groups have assumed a proactive role in building code legislation, which focuses on repair, retrofit and adaptive re-use, rather than demolition of damaged structures.

In addition to direct physical damages, the bombing also severely impacted the local economy. A number of businesses were forced to close, many had to scale back their operations during the first two-to-three years of recovery, and others simply moved out of the area. In an



effort to reverse this downturn, the City established a loan program in partnership with three local banks to provide an incentive to business recovery in the affected area. The primary purpose of the loan program is to re-establish a level of economic activity in the affected area equivalent to that which existed prior to the bombing. Again, the City and the SHPO actively promoted understanding of Section 106 review and rehabilitation tax credits for historic buildings to encourage appropriate rehabilitation as businesses continue to improve their economic status. This was one of the first examples of private reinvestment in the area as the banks supplied 70% of the funding compared to the City's 30% contribution.

Some of the most notable historic buildings to receive assistance through the revitalization program include St. Paul's Cathedral, First Methodist Church, St. Joseph's Cathedral, and Calvary Baptist Church. The need to provide rehabilitation funds to these severely damaged and culturally prominent structures brought with it questions concerning the constitutionality of giving federal funds to religious institutions. In an effort to accommodate these special circumstances, the NPS awarded the SHPO a \$40,000 matching grant from recaptured historic preservation funds. The SHPO offered the NRHP listed and eligible churches the opportunity to apply for assistance for development of restoration/rehabilitation plans. St. Paul's Cathedral and Calvary Baptist Church each requested and received a quarter of the pool of funds for planning. The other half was granted to the City through a special CLG sub-grant to complete inventory work in the downtown and to prepare



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a NRHP nomination for Automobile Alley Historic District, as well as preservation plan and design guidelines. This new historic district was identified, placed on the NRHP and became an award winning Main Street Program. Murrah District Revitalization Program funding in the amount of \$6.8 million, which included \$1.6 million for streetscape improvements through the City Public Works Department, leveraged \$20.5 million in private investment for a total of over \$25 million in this district alone. Many of the property owners used tax incentives for historic structures and insisted that the new design guidelines be consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation* to insure consistency on the local level with established preservation programs. The public funds used for

bomb-related damage and revitalization stimulated private sector investment throughout the downtown area. The federal funds coupled with renewed interest in the historic tax credit program have spurred private investment for rehabilitation and new construction that has been absent for 30 years. This investment and the prospect of a new federal campus have stimulated renewed interest in urban housing. An urban design review process has been established for the resulting future development.

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Photos courtesy Wil Moore, Ace Aerial.

Call for Abstracts

This issue of *CRM* on disaster management for cultural properties has only scratched the surface. In fact, we have additional articles that could not fit into this issue. In 2001, there will be another issue of *CRM* on disasters focusing on disaster preparedness, planning, and mitigation. If you are interested in preparing an article (approximately 1,100 words and two illustrations) for the next disaster issue, please send a 50- to 150-word abstract to <David_W_Look@nps.gov> by November 1, 2000. Authors will be notified by December 1, 2000, if their abstracts have been accepted. Articles and illustrations will be due on April 1, 2001.



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